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Liberty or Death: The French Revolution, by Peter McPhee (New Haven and London: Yale U.P., 2016); pp. xiii + 468. £25.00.

The history of the French Revolution is often written from a Parisian perspective, with the capital acting and the rest of France either following in its wake with different degrees of grumbling, or resisting. Yet for Peter McPhee, this is too one-sided an approach. 'The Revolution', he argues (p. xii), 'is best understood as a process of negotiation and confrontation between government in Paris and people across the country'. Paris was, McPhee accepts, the epicentre, but since only one in forty French people lived in the capital in the 1780s, at the crux of his interpretation is an exploration as to 'how rural and small-town men and women adopted, adapted to and resisted change from Paris'. These changes challenged and transformed long-held assumptions and practices in the wielding of power across the provinces. The impulse behind this transformation was the great revolutionary project to remake France anew on the principles of popular sovereignty, national unity and civic equality. The revolutionaries faced a series of daunting challenges in pursuit of these aims. France been an absolute monarchy based on a complex web of privileges and provincial differences. There were powerful and numerous interests – both inside France and without – who were determined to defend those privileges, the hierarchies they underpinned and who lamented the assault on old habits in the exercise of power and deference, as well as against traditional religious authority and practices. It is this dual, interconnected dynamic – between Paris and the provinces and between revolution and resistance to it – that drives McPhee's narrative forward at an almost breathless pace.

An experienced practitioner of the history of provincial France, especially of the world of the peasants, McPhee shows a grasp of the local experience that is truly impressive – the more so for being woven skilfully into the absorbing, broader story of the Revolution at large. The author has brought to bear his considerable knowledge of the French peasantry, on the rural environment and on the Revolution. He has travelled widely across provincial France, foraging deeply in archives in no fewer than twelve different *départements* outside Paris – as well as archives in the capital itself. Every major event is set not just in its Parisian but also in its provincial context. The chapter on the impact of the Civil Constitution of the Clergy and the clerical oath (intriguingly entitled 'Fracturing Christ's Family'), for example, is enlivened by a wealth of analysis of the variegated ways in which the reforms played out and how people responded across a wide range of localities. A particularly evocative case (p. 135) is that of Saint-Julien-de-Sault in Burgundy, where on the second anniversary of the fall of the Bastille citizens celebrated the achievements of the Revolution by ordering a massive new bell for the church tower, its 1,550 kg bulk blessed by the parish priest, who also secured a stone of the Bastille for the village – where (McPhee tells us, providing a photograph in the illustrations) it remains today. It is a mark of a career's worth of immersion in rural France that McPhee's book is peppered with such local detail.

McPhee therefore brings to his analysis an understanding of the contradictions between the aspirations of the revolutionary leadership on the one hand and, on the other, the grinding economic and social realities facing the mass of French citizens, their cultural expectations and their entrenched customs and assumptions. While McPhee is sympathetic to

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the emancipating aims of the Revolution, his sensitivity to the local experience gives his book a reasoned and fair balance. Thus the pages (pp. 176-9) on the outbreak of the counter-revolutionary uprising in the Vendée in 1793 engages with it through the eyes of both the insurgents and the republicans, stressing not only the social and cultural head of steam that had built up in western France since 1789, but also the mutual incomprehension and visceral hatreds that drove both sides to commit ghastly atrocities.

McPhee connects his impressive depth of analysis of the tug-of-war between revolutionary regimes and communities across France with both the wider national dimension and the international perspective. This broader narrative is driven forward by the Revolution as a struggle – against overwhelming odds – of the revolutionaries to establish a political and social system based on the sovereignty of the people, civil equality, the abolition of privilege and seigneurialism (and, from 1794, of slavery), the separation of church and state and a (very mild) degree of women's emancipation (in the shape of a liberal divorce law and equality of inheritance). As McPhee emphasises at strategic points throughout, the French Revolution had a European and indeed global impact. The significance of the French Revolution can only be fully grasped in this wider context, arising as it did from a wider crisis of European empires in the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It was the most significant part of a slow-moving revolutionary cascade that shook the Atlantic world from the 1760s to the 1830s. McPhee is careful to emphasise the depth and far-reaching impact of the French Revolution compared with all the others: it was in France, he stresses in his conclusion (p. 369), that the implications of the principles of the eighteenth-century revolutions were realised in their most radical and far-reaching form. The French Revolutionary Wars were important to this experience, since only in France was the revolution able to unleash the full energies of a people – and to prevail - against the onslaught of an international coalition determined to destroy the Republic at birth.

Scholarly, yet readable, analytical yet never losing sight of the human experience, Peter McPhee's new history will surely take its place alongside other, well-established English-language single volumes such as William Doyle's *Oxford History of the French Revolution* (2002, with a new edition forthcoming) and David Andress's *The Terror* (2005), as amongst the best historical writing on the French Revolution.

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